United Nations

A/54/PV.26

General Assembly

Fifty-fourth session

Official Records

26th plenary meeting
Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Gurirab ..... (Namibia)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Jordán-Pando (Bolivia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Agenda item 106 (*continued*)

Social development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family: follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons

Report of the Secretary-General (A/54/268)

Draft resolution (A/54/L.6)

Mr. Lewis (Antigua and Barbuda): Allow me at the outset to express my support for the statement made on Monday by the representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. I also wish to commend Ambassador Julia Alvarez of the Dominican Republic for her untiring efforts in support of the United Nations agenda for older persons.

As we focus on the theme of the International Year of Older Persons, "Towards a society for all ages", we are struck by its unifying nature. "Towards a society for all ages" clearly must embrace the notion of communities in which every member contributes to growth and prosperity. It must involve both young and old, and it must acknowledge the socio-economic changes affecting the ability of our countries to achieve the sustainable development inherent in "a society for all ages".

Older persons have traditionally served as a bonding agent for the immediate and extended family. The 1982 International Plan of Action on Ageing supports this intergenerational role by noting that throughout history, older persons have educated the younger and passed on values to them, a role that ensured humanity's survival and progress. Today many of our countries, particularly developing countries, struggle to retain these and similar bonds of tradition in the face of fewer development dollars, trends in migration and, perhaps most significantly, the onslaught of globalization.

Antigua and Barbuda's 1991 Population and Housing Census revealed that persons in the age group of 65 years and over made up 8.2 per cent of the population. I wish here, at this plenary meeting of the General Assembly commemorating the International Year of Older Persons, 1999, to pay homage to the contributions that these citizens have made to the building of our nation.

We acknowledge the significance of these contributions with pride. However, it is with a measure of disquiet that we must admit that the protection of this significant number of older persons has presented a challenge to the existing social and health services of Antigua and Barbuda. This challenge becomes even more acute when one considers the changes previously referred to in family structure and the gradual breakdown of the community support systems which existed in the past. The net result is that many older persons are living alone with minimal financial support and without assistance to complete basic household and other tasks. Those

99-86046 (E)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original speeches only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

challenges notwithstanding, Antigua and Barbuda earnestly began to implement the 1982 International Plan of Action within its own national context.

Our country marked the beginning of the International Year on 1 October 1998. An awareness campaign was launched right at the outset, utilizing print and the electronic media to dispel many myths about and stereotypes of elders. Elders were included in all aspects of our independence activities in November; those who participated in the Independence Food Fair were awarded prizes for their contributions. From January to March 1999, an initiative to reconnect generations was launched, and it was observed with various activities throughout the year. During World Health Week in April, individual villages handed out honours to older persons who have remained active in their community. Also in April a national consultation began under the theme "active ageing makes a difference". The theme for this October's health fair is, "Active, healthy living and ageing". Some of the issues being discussed during the fair include nutrition, disease, sex and the elderly, HIV/AIDS, general health care and care for the mentally challenged elderly. Studies are currently being carried out by the Gender Affairs Division of the Ministry of Health and Social Improvement on the provision of free electricity and water services for persons 80 years of age and over.

In August 1990 the Citizen's Welfare Division conducted a needs analysis survey among older persons. The survey revealed that -- regardless of social or economic status - loneliness and neglect were the main problems confronting older persons in Antigua and Barbuda. They were followed closely by the need for assistance with household tasks, such as food preparation, cleaning and personal hygiene. Limited financial resources and poor housing were also identified as compelling problems. In order to best address the needs of the older segment of the population, the Government determined that it was necessary to enact legislation that could support the social welfare policy and facilitate programme implementation for both Government and non-governmental agencies. This was accomplished with a draft policy on ageing based on the proposed Caribbean charter on health and ageing, a draft of which was developed in Nassau, the Bahamas, in May 1998.

One of the main components of Antigua and Barbuda's draft policy on ageing was created out of the awareness that life expectancy cannot be separated from the enjoyment of good health. In this regard, several Government programmes have been identified to provide health services to the elderly. Outreach clinics, district doctors, the medical benefits scheme and the social security scheme are but a few of them.

Private agencies and institutions also play an active role in the care of older persons. The Board of Guardians provides a bimonthly stipend for those people 60 years of age and over who do not receive a pension. The Government collaborates regularly with such private agencies and institutions. The Antigua and Barbuda Association for the Welfare of Senior Citizens, for example, has recently acquired land from the Government and will soon start fund-raising activities for the construction of a centre.

The Citizen's Welfare Division has recognized the need to fill the gaps in the service needs of the physically healthy, yet vulnerable, elderly. To assist in bridging those gaps, the Government started a home help service in 1988 by which people are trained to provide health-care services in the homes of elders. The recipients are assessed according to age, mental and health status, mobility and disabilities, nutritional state, hygienic state and environmental and social conditions. An attendant programme, the welfare aides service, was established in 1990. That programme was developed to focus on meeting the social, recreational, emotional and even some of the spiritual needs of older persons. That programme is coordinated by the chief welfare officer.

The main goal of such programmes as the home help workers and the welfare aides service programmes is to maintain older persons in their homes and communities for as long as possible by meeting their personal care needs, thereby helping to relieve some of the loneliness and stress that elder participants have themselves identified as a main concern of their generation.

As was demonstrated in the twenty-second special session which recently concluded, small island developing States have particular vulnerabilities that affect all members of our societies, regardless of age. Because of our annual brush with potentially devastating natural disasters, the Citizen's Welfare Division and the National Office of Disaster Services have been working closely to ensure that the homes of older persons who may not be able to make requests themselves are included in the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase following a hurricane or other natural disaster. Due to the frequency of such storms, that is one of the single most important

examples of collaboration that exists in support of the elders of our community.

In conclusion, the wisdom contained in the International Plan of Action remains as relevant today as it was almost two decades ago. It states that the presence of the elderly in the family home, the neighbourhood and in all forms of social life still teaches an irreplaceable lesson of humanity.

We believe in those lessons of patience, respect and honour, and we know that if we are to add life to the years that have been added to life, we must continue to find ways to enable elders to play vital, contributing roles in their communities and thereby reclaim those valuable lessons of humanity.

Mr. Babar (Pakistan): My delegation associates itself with the statement on the International Year of Older Persons made by the Permanent Representative of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

The international community has been conscious of the silent revolution which the phenomenon of ageing is likely to bring about in the population structure of the world in the next century. The Vienna World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 was a recognition at the international level of the fact that the ageing of the population would not only affect the developed countries but also have an impact on the developing countries.

The celebration of the International Year of Older Persons, as we stand on the threshold of the new millennium, provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the likely impact of this impending demographic revolution on various societies and to develop appropriate strategies to meet that challenge.

In his report entitled "International Year of Older Persons, 1999: activities and legacies" (A/54/268), the Secretary-General has given details of activities which the United Nations system, regional intergovernmental organizations, national Governments and non-governmental organizations have undertaken throughout the Year to promote public understanding of its theme, "Towards a society for all ages". These activities have helped to considerably enhance global awareness about this issue.

Fortunately, unlike many other challenges, the ageing of the population is predictable in its timing and its magnitude, which have already been identified. The elderly of the next century have already been born. Projections indicate that by 2050 the number of people aged 65 and beyond worldwide will grow from 426 million to 1.47 billion. The phenomenon of ageing has been more pronounced in developed countries, where reduced fertility together with declining mortality has transformed the age structure of populations. It is anticipated that by 2030 almost every third person in developed countries will be over 60 years of age. This will have an impact on the patterns of labour migration as well as on the economic and political policies of developed countries.

The ageing of the population in the industrialized countries has taken more than a century. This process is expected to occur much more rapidly in the developing countries. However, in view of certain negative developments in the developing world, particularly in the African continent, where life expectancy has in fact declined, we need to further refine our projections. Coupled with the adverse effects of widespread and pervasive poverty, the phenomenon of ageing will have far-reaching implications for the efforts of developing countries to achieve the sustained economic growth and social development which are fundamental for ensuring a better quality of life for the entire population.

Pakistan is fully conscious of the challenge of the ageing of the population. As a country 40 per cent of whose population are in their teens, we are likely to be affected more acutely by this phenomenon. Pakistan launched its activities for the International Year of Older Persons on 1 October 1998.

The Government has taken various steps to ensure that older people continue to participate actively in the social, economic and political life of the country. As part of this effort, the Government has announced a package of benefits for elderly people, and is currently working on a comprehensive medicare package for older persons to ensure that they can enjoy a healthy life.

Notwithstanding the various steps being undertaken by the Government for the welfare and care of older persons, it is the family which remains the institution that must shoulder the responsibility for the care and welfare of older people in Pakistani society.

The increasing pressures of modern life and rapid urbanization are putting strains on traditional informal support structures in Pakistan. The Government is endeavouring to assist in adapting these support structures to the new demands of urbanization. We will continue to strengthen the social support base for the elderly in our

society. We also hope to gain from the experience of other countries and societies in this area through regular interaction among the members of the international community.

Mr. Adechi (Benin) (*spoke in French*): My delegation is grateful for the opportunity to speak on this agenda item. I associate myself with the views set out by Ambassador Insanally of Guyana on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

The observance of the International Year of Older Persons falls at the end of a cycle and at the dawn of a new era. We in Benin have a proverb: "It is at the end of the old cord that you knot the new". This means that the social microcosm depends on continuity and on change; there is no break in it, and no exclusion. That is why we welcome the stress the Year has placed on building a "society for all ages".

In the culture of Benin, as in those of many other African countries, long life is viewed as a sign of divine grace; indeed, the funeral of an elderly person is an occasion for celebration. It is on the basis of our African experience that we are participating in this debate and making our contribution on the situation of older persons in the context of assessing the International Year of Older Persons.

The ageing of the world population should not take us by surprise. It is simply the result of scientific and technological progress by humans; these scientific, technological and medical advances have been aimed, *inter alia*, at fulfilling the universal human dream of longer life. We should rather focus on the impoverishment, increasing marginalization and exclusion brought about by our socio-economic development choices, and thus take greater account of the social and human dimensions of development if we want that development to be sustainable.

In Africa in general, and in Benin in particular, older persons enjoy high esteem. Not only are they a repository of experience which society constantly draws on, but they are also the ultimate recourse for easing social tensions when these reach the breaking point. In Benin, as in many other African countries in which the majority of the population is rural, ageing is active ageing, although it must be acknowledged that it is certainly less productive, since the rural exodus is the sphere of younger people.

Hence, the problem of older persons cannot be seen basically in terms of an intergenerational dialogue, inclusion and participation in the community by older persons. It is more a question of the dignity that is inherent in their age, and of the fulfilment they have a right to expect; these are threatened by the effects of extreme poverty and the breakup of the social fabric caused by the armed conflicts and fratricidal wars that have destroyed the network of solidarity that guarded against risks of all kinds. The situation of older women is a source of even greater concern, because they suffer from a twofold handicap: they are women and they are older persons.

Because of these facts, Benin, where 7 per cent of the population consists of older persons, has established a Ministry of Social Protection and the Family, whose goals for the International Year of Older Persons included: strengthening the ability of older persons to take control of their lives; conducting a nationwide study on the situation of older persons; the establishment of geriatric centres in hospitals; and technical and financial support for income-generating projects for older persons.

Grass-roots capacity-building to increase the autonomy of rural communities; promoting microcredits to increase income; the adoption of laws on land ownership; and ensuring that basic needs are met in a generalized and fair manner with a view to strengthening community and family security systems: we view these as measures that should be addressed at a 2002 World Assembly on Ageing if we want to build a society in which individuals of all ages can live in harmony.

Ms. Morgan-Moss (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): The delegation of Panama endorses the statement delivered by the delegate from Guyana, who spoke on behalf of the Group of 77 and China on the issue of the International Year of Older Persons. We would like, in our turn, to report to the Assembly on the policies we have developed in our country for implementing the recommendations of the World Assembly on Ageing, held in Vienna in 1982.

Panama thanks the Secretary-General for his report on the subject of ageing. It identifies priority areas and the situation at the global and regional levels, along with the impact that this will have in the future on the world's peoples.

The total population of Panama amounts to 2,809,280 for the year 1999, of which 224,403 are older persons. According to the 1990 census, this figure

represents 7.6 per cent of our population. By the year 2000, the percentage will rise to 8.1.

In our country, the population of older persons reflects the pattern typical of our part of the world: rapid growth as reflected by the census data for the seventies, eighties and nineties, with a substantial and sustained rise into the new millennium. The low infant mortality rate, decline in the fertility rate, declining birth rates and increasing life expectancies are creating this phenomenon.

Women begin to outnumber men as they get older because of the higher mortality rate for men at more advanced ages. The proportion is three widows for every widower. The belief is that one of the reasons for the differences in mortality between men and women is the general tendency of men to run greater health risks, while women have more prevention-oriented behaviour and go to the doctor more often than do men, resulting in longer life expectancy.

Life expectancy for Panamanian citizens is estimated to be 72.5 years, and it is expected that for the five-year period 1995-2000 it will be 73.3. Currently women have a life expectancy at birth of 74.1 in the cities and 69.9 in the countryside. The Panamanian population, though it has remained young in structure, reflects a slight but sustained ageing trend. The average age of Panamanians is 22 years.

Panama has entered into a variety of commitments as it has participated in various international events in the period from 1990 through 1999; these have served as tools and guidelines in designing plans, programmes and policies geared towards older persons. These are being driven by the Ministry of Youth, Women, Children and the Family through the National Council on Older Persons, created by virtue of Decree-Law No. 23 of 24 June 1999.

To commemorate the International Year of Older Persons, activities such as literary contests, parades and a variety of cultural events have been developed, with highlights such as the Week of Older Persons from 16 through 20 November, teachers' conferences, the national meeting of retired persons and pensioners, nationwide talks on ageing and information, education and communications campaigns on ageing. The preparation, adoption and promulgation of a decree-law establishing a single nationwide set of rules to govern centres and nursing homes for older persons was very important.

Publicizing the principles developed by the United Nations for the benefit of older persons, research on risk factors impairing the functional autonomy of older adults, the Flower Games for Seniors organized by the Social Security Administration and the Ministry of Youth, Women, Children and the Family from 23 through 26 February of this year, training seminars on first aid in May and on care and treatment for older persons in August, integrating the theme of ageing and working activities related to ageing into national events and commemorations such as International Family Day on 15 May and Family Week in June — all these are among the many additional ways that the Government of Panama is seeking to mark and promote the International Year of Older Persons.

We must not let the enormous repercussions of the demographic revolution go unnoticed, for it affects every individual, family, neighbourhood and nation of the world. The organization of society will feel the effects of this new reality as the population continues to grow older.

Let us realize that the older population represents a challenge for humanity for which we must find a commensurate response. As our tireless and admirable fighter to whom we owe so much, Mrs. Julia Alvarez, the Ambassador of the Dominican Republic, has said, we will not let all these efforts end at the stroke of midnight on 31 December of this year.

Mr. Benítez Saénz (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, the delegation of Uruguay appreciates the report by the Secretary-General, A/54/268, for its sweeping overview of the commemoration of 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, inspired by the idea of a society for all ages. We would highlight the efforts by the Division for Social Policy and Development in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as well as by those in the Commission for Social Development and its Chairman, Mr. Aurelio Fernández, to promote a new awareness of this issue, as well as their work in preparing strategies in concert with Governments, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and the entire spectrum of civil society.

My delegation would like to pay particular tribute to the work done by Ambassador Julia Tavares de Alvarez, whose conviction and indefatigable commitment have guided and constantly spurred us on in our work.

The ageing of the population is a major social problem for many countries. The international community has progressively become more aware of the impact

which this phenomenon is having on societies, on economies and on culture in general.

Phenomena such as a high concentration of the population in the urban centres, the processes of industrialization, development of the service sector, a change the role of women in the home and in society, transformations of the workforce, increased poverty and marginalization of some parts of society and an expansion of the informal sector of employment — all this has weighed on the question of old age, in the world and in Uruguay.

These developments have led to a change in the age distribution of the population, including a rise in the proportion of the population that is elderly. In Uruguay, during the period 1990-1995 the number of people under 15 years of age decreased by 2 per cent, whereas the number of those 65 or older increased by 1.5 per cent. During the same period the average life expectancy at birth rose from 70 to 74 years. Further, it is expected that the proportion of the adult population over 65 years of age will continue to increase, reaching almost 14 per cent of the total population by the year 2025, and life expectancy at birth will rise to 81 years.

As with a considerable number of moderately and highly developed countries, in Uruguay the transformation of the population is affecting such fundamental areas as the structure of the labour pool, the social security system and health-care systems. In addition, the growth of the older population may lead to changes in production and consumption patterns. The implications of these processes for the family and for society as a whole are considerable and unprecedented.

In preparation for the International Year of Older Persons, a series of activities was launched in Uruguay. The first was the establishment in 1995 of our National Programme of Solidarity with Older Persons. The aim of this Programme was to deal with this major public issue in various sectors of the social sphere through an interdisciplinary, integral and global approach. The fundamental goals of the national policy on ageing are to create a national awareness enabling us to recognize the value of older persons and of their integral development, their integration into family and national life, and the promotion of the concept of productive ageing. It is our understanding that the ageing process of a population is part of the development of a community; that healthy ageing, in particular, allows older persons to play a major role in their families and in the economy as a whole; and that the process affords opportunities for learning, development and a continuing contribution to society.

Within this context of preparatory activities, in August 1997 in Montevideo, the Latin American Parliament and the Pan American Health Organization held an international forum on ageing. At that forum were 115 representatives from 21 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and the United States. They adopted the Montevideo declaration, which presented agreed recommendations in five specific areas: social security, health protection and promotion, housing and community services, productive ageing and intergenerational relations, and the preparations for the International Year of Older Persons.

At the subregional level — following through on the resolutions adopted in Buenos Aires in December 1997, at the first meeting on the social aspects of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) — in September 1998 the National Institute for Solidarity with Older Persons held a seminar on older persons involving the exchange of regional experiences. Seminar discussions analysed the demographics of ageing, social well-being, protecting older persons, informal education and integrating older persons into communities. Experiences of intergenerational integration were compared.

In Uruguay we have recognized the need to increase awareness of the changes and implications brought on by an ageing society, because we understand the importance of striking a proper balance between the legitimate aspirations of the young and those of older persons.

In the context of the global campaign of postcards from older persons — a campaign organized with a view to commemorating both the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Year of Older Persons — an elderly man from Uruguay wrote:

> "No one gets old simply by having lived a certain number of years. You only get old when you abandon your ideals. The years wrinkle the skin, but only the loss of enthusiasm wrinkles the soul."

We therefore trust that this special commemoration of the General Assembly will make a valuable contribution to the definition of long-range strategies on ageing, and that the efforts to integrate older persons into a society for all ages will continue.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): Before we hear the next speaker, I would like to propose that the list of speakers be closed 10 minutes from now.

It was so decided.

Mr. Sychov (Belarus) (*spoke in Russian*): The Government of the Republic of Belarus attaches great importance to the activities of the United Nations in the area of ageing. Protecting and assisting older persons is one of the basic thrusts of the national social policy of Belarus.

At present, the total population of the Republic of Belarus is 10.3 million, of which 2 million are elderly people — 988 of them being 100 years of age or older. The constant increase in the proportion of the total population that is elderly means that we need to improve existing mechanisms and create new ones for assisting older persons.

Pursuant to the decisions taken by the General Assembly regarding the observance in 1999 of the International Year of Older Persons, with the slogan, "Towards a society for all ages", the Republic of Belarus established a national commission to prepare for the commemoration of the Year. This commission was headed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus. It elaborated and adopted a plan of basic actions. The main principle of the plan is the active, direct participation of each ministry, along with other national and local organs of State administration, businesses, associations and organizations, in the observance of the International Year of Older Persons. The basic focus was on practical steps to provide social protection and assistance to older people in the country.

In order to improve social services for older people we adopted a plan for social service centres for senior citizens and the disabled. The main aim of creating these centres is to provide maximum, comprehensive assistance to these people. Houses for social services are being established to serve people in small, remote areas. Throughout the country there are 176 social service centres, which include subsidized stores and facilities for medical teams and household services. Cultural events and meetings of educational groups and of staff of social service agencies are held in these centres.

The legislative basis is being improved for the social protection of veterans. The House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus has heard the first reading of a draft bill of the Republic calling for the introduction of changes and additions to the Republic's law on veterans. A great deal is being done to prepare this draft bill for consideration in a second reading.

In the context of measures to commemorate the International Year of Older Persons, the Government of Belarus has elaborated a draft programme to support the Republic's national and local veterans' organizations for the period 2000-2005.

In order to resolve the problem of improving pension coverage and the differentiation in pension sizes based on previous earnings, in March 1999 a decree was adopted by the President of the Republic of Belarus on additional measures to improve pension coverage for citizens. As a result of the implementation of the decree, the level of pension coverage has risen for over one third of pensioners.

In the context of events to commemorate the International Year of Older Persons, a geriatric service has been organized in Belarus and a laboratory established for the medical and social problems of the elderly. A Republican Gerontology Centre has also been established and a public institute known as Health for the Elderly is now functioning. A seminar was also held on the role of the mass media in creating a healthy lifestyle. In preparation for the International Year, a statistical reference book, entitled *Older Persons in the Republic of Belarus*, was published.

It is important to note that, in resolving the problem of social protection for the elderly, local executive and administrative organs have cooperated very closely with public organizations for veterans and the disabled, the charitable fund, the committees of the Red Cross and trade unions.

The delegation of the Republic of Belarus agrees with the section of the Secretary-General's report on the responsibility of Governments and on choosing one's own approach to implementing in practical terms the concept of a society for all ages. We believe that older persons are the pride and wealth of a country; in the future, we will help to meet their most vital needs.

The Government of Belarus reaffirms its commitment to the United Nations principles for older persons and its willingness to contribute to the Organization's future activities on the outcome of the

International Year of Older Persons in order to implement the concept of a society for all ages.

Mrs. Fouda (Cameroon) (*spoke in French*): My country is delighted to have this opportunity to participate in the debate on such an important topic. This is a question that concerns us all, since it pertains to a period of life during which we are particularly vulnerable, just as we are in our earliest years when we need more assistance and the support of a helping hand.

Aware of the importance of this subject, the General Assembly decided in its resolution 33/52 of 14 December 1978 to organize a World Assembly on Ageing to launch an International Plan of Action to ensure the economic and social security of the elderly and to enable them to continue to contribute to social development.

As I stressed in February at a meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the problem of old age has a very strong cultural dimension that can be seen in different ways depending on a country's cultures and traditions. In traditional Africa, old age is the beautiful age. The elderly are considered to be wise and are venerated as the repositories of ancestral wisdom, the guardians of our customs and traditions, and the regulators of the daily life of clans and families. Young people learn about life from them. Their death is generally considered to be a great loss to the community. Do we not say, after all, that an old person who dies is a library that has burned down?

The central and in many respects enviable role of the elderly in traditional African society defines the way they are treated by other members of the family or clan. The older person generally grows within the family circle, where he or she enjoys the affection of the family and benefits from its constant assistance. Rendering such assistance is considered to be a sacred duty and members of the younger generation are happy to do so out of gratitude for the care they have received. In traditional society, and in our African understanding, the elderly are naturally integrated into the family environment, where they receive their children and grandchildren and the care and welfare that their advanced age and economic inactivity require.

The customs of Cameroonian society do not provide for an older person's being separated from the family environment to be placed in an institution or retirement home. On the contrary, the retirement into isolation that is dictated by socio-economic considerations in the West is seen in Africa as the result of the family's or community's dereliction of its age-old duties and obligations. In Cameroon, which has over 15 million inhabitants, the elderly make up 6 per cent of the population and will account for 10 per cent by 2050, according to the estimates of the United Nations Population Fund.

Despite the existence of the family structure, which basically provides the context for managing that segment of the population, it should be noted that the dependent status of the elderly is already being felt. Because of urbanization, apartments are growing smaller and more costly. Many children do not live with their parents and the elderly no longer cultivate the land with their children because of the reduction of jobs through structural adjustment policies.

Although the problem of an ageing population in Cameroon has not yet become as acute as it is in some countries, my Government has nevertheless established a policy on ageing that integrates the need to prepare young people to live an active old age. With respect to rules and regulations, practical steps for protecting older persons have been prepared in various codes regulating social life. In the Civil Code, based on the Napoleonic Code, the obligation to assist and support parents is imposed on their children. In the Penal Code, neglect, exploitation and abandonment of dependent elders are punishable. In the Work Code, a retirement pension is a legal right.

These regulations are supplemented by various social, health, administrative and cultural measures. The Government, through its many social welfare activities, is trying to improve the well-being of the elderly by providing material and psycho-social assistance. With respect to health care, geriatric services have been established in certain health agencies. With respect to administration, a special service has been created to protect and reintegrate the elderly under the Department of National Solidarity of the Ministry for Social Affairs.

Certain traditional chiefs have the status of auxiliary public administration officials, whereas other, more experienced people play the role of resourcers in the day-to-day management of communal life and in certain legal jurisdictions, where they serve as assessors.

Culturally, a literacy programme was set up for the elderly, known as "The school under the tree". This successful programme, which is oriented more towards rural populations, seeks to improve the reading and

writing abilities of people in this age group. All the arrangements that I have described are based on Cameroonian traditions, which encourage keeping older people in the family environment. Non-governmental organizations and other associations also use this environment to improve the well-being of these people. My country has already provided some facilities to ensure the well-being of abandoned old people — for example Bethany Viacam Centre, the Home of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the works of Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity, all located on the outskirts of Yaoundé.

Properly combining tradition and modernity to confront the problems of ageing is a real challenge for developing countries such as mine, which must also fight widespread poverty. Accordingly, international solidarity is absolutely imperative. My country is therefore happy to have this opportunity to participate in the debate on this important item. It is a matter which concerns us all, dealing with a period of life when we are particularly vulnerable, a period similar to the one when we took our first steps and needed assistance and a helping hand.

Mr. Kasanda (Zambia): My delegation associates itself with the statement made by Ambassador Insanally, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Guyana to the United Nations, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. This statement adequately expressed the positions on social development, including the world social situation in general and the situation of older persons in particular.

I also welcome the statement made by the Deputy Secretary-General on Monday to this Assembly regarding the commemoration of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999. I confirm my Government's strong appreciation of the efforts of the United Nations in preparing for the Year, as reflected in the Secretary-General's report (A/54/268), which my delegation found most helpful. The International Year of Older Persons has provided us with an opportunity to appreciate the contributions of older persons to human development. During this Year media attention was drawn to the activities and the situation of older persons, and in particular to the conditions under which they live.

My Government has long recognized the important role social development plays in economic and human development. Indeed, the fight against unemployment, social disintegration and poverty cannot be fully meaningful unless measures are taken at the international, regional and, indeed, national levels to adequately address the socio-economic problems which are inevitably associated with social development. We are convinced that through these measures we will be responding to the situation of youths, ageing disabled persons and the family, as outlined in the Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the United Nations World Summit for Social Development, convened at Copenhagen, Denmark, in March 1995.

The commemoration of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 is, therefore, a welcome development, it is because of the foresight and commitment of the older persons of today that the world enjoys the high levels of human development that we know. Older persons shaped the present century, and thanks to their wisdom, humankind can collectively, as we complete the last year of the twentieth century, confront with confidence the challenges of the third millennium.

In spite of the acknowledged achievements and contributions of older persons to modern civilization, the world does not appear to have paid much attention to their specific needs and roles. With due regard to the disparities that exist between the developing and the developed countries, there is a need to allocate adequate resources to programmes and institutions serving older persons in all countries. The situation of older persons is made even worse by the gap between the rich and the poor within a given society. Older persons are in certain cases still viewed in many countries as a burden rather than the asset that they are.

The Zambian Government, in commemorating 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, undertook several projects to strengthen institutional capacities for the aged, including the rehabilitation of homes for the aged. The Department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services mobilized material and financial resources in support of aged persons in the care of both Government agencies and non-governmental organizations. Large quantities of foodstuffs and clothing were provided to older persons in these institutions.

The Government of Zambia also marked the International Year of Older Persons by focusing attention on the contributions made by older persons in our country to national development. In this regard, national awards were given to deserving individuals at a colourful ceremony held at State House in Lusaka.

While Governments strive to improve the situation of older persons, it is important that the United Nations, through the appropriate agencies, continue to provide the necessary coordination in the full implementation of the Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the United Nations World Summit for Social Development, which addressed the issues of ageing in the context of development.

Mr. Stanislaus (Grenada): It is right, fitting and proper that one of the highlights of the turn of the century and the beginning of a new millennium should be to focus on the International Year of Older Persons, some in the twilight and others in the sunset of their lives.

The great English philosopher and jurist, Sir Francis Bacon, in one of his essays in 1605, glorified age or the elderly in the following way: "Age is best in four ways: old wood the best to burn, old wine the best to drink, old books the best to read, and old friends the best to keep." This philosophical perception of age is very comforting and indeed inspiring to the ears of older persons like myself, now on the cusp of my eightieth year, still holding on to the belief that instead of adding years to my life, I am adding life to my years.

It is in this spirit, therefore, and with this in mind, that my delegation greets, salutes and congratulates Ambassador Julia Alvarez, of the Dominican Republic, for her invaluable contribution and for her championing and working so assiduously to promote the activities of the United Nations Programme of Action on Ageing in celebration of the International Year of Older Persons.

It might be useful from a historical perspective to highlight the evolutionary process leading to the International Year. The international community first debated the question of ageing in 1948 at the United Nations, on the initiative of Argentina. In 1969 Malta again raised the issue, and in 1982 the United Nations convened the World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna. This was followed later that year by the United Nations endorsement of the International Plan of Action on Ageing; and in 1990, 1 October was designated the International Day of Older Persons. On 16 December 1991, the United Nations Principles for Older Persons were adopted by the General Assembly and organized into the following five clusters: first, independence of thought, action and movement of older persons; secondly, participation and association by sharing their knowledge and skills with younger generations; thirdly, care, including health of body and mind, protection from want, enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms; fourthly, self-fulfilment, through education, cultural, spiritual and recreational activities; and fifthly, dignity, by being safe and secure and free from exploitation, physical or mental abuse, regardless of age, gender and racial or ethnic background.

Many countries and cultures have adopted these Principles and incorporated them into their national agendas. My own country, Grenada, with scarce financial resources, has only recently improved the lives of pensioners by a healthy increase in their monthly allowance.

In this celebration of the International Year of Older Persons, the theme of which is "Towards a society for all ages", we are reminded of the words of Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who said,

> "A society for all is one that does not caricature older persons as patients and pensioners. Instead, it sees them as both agents and beneficiaries of development. It honours traditional elders in their leadership and consultative roles in communities throughout the world".

This forward-looking role for older persons contrasts with the attitude towards them at the beginning of the twentieth century, when life expectancy worldwide was 20 years less than it is today, when older persons with no families, no employment, no recreation, no social services and no social security had to fend for themselves in what should have been the golden years of their lives. Then it used to be said that the worst thing that could happen to someone was to be old, poor and sick. President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States immortalized himself, while giving dignity and support to the elderly, by introducing the saving net of social security in America.

Age can be both an opportunity and a drag — an opportunity to share knowledge and experience, a drag because of loneliness and lack of companionship. However, according to the writings of the immortal Plato, many centuries before Christ,

> "He who is of a calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressures of age, but to him who is of an opposite disposition, youth and age alike are equally burdensome".

Finally, the following verse comes to mind:

Journey through the years.
Speak with kindness; cause no tears.
Do some good along the way. Do a little every day.
Let no good by thee be marred. Let no duty seem too hard.
In all things do your best.
And then to God you'll leave the rest.

Mr. De Saram (Sri Lanka): I have the honour, on behalf of Sri Lanka, to participate in this important consideration in the General Assembly of the vast and global problem of the ageing of populations around the world.

The fact that this is in all probability the last debate on the subject of ageing that will take place in the General Assembly — this year, this century, this millennium — gives this debate special significance. The number of speakers that have addressed the Assembly on the subject of ageing speaks to the importance of the subject. They have spoken eloquently. With what they have said, Sri Lanka would concur.

I would only wish, on behalf of Sri Lanka, to reaffirm that the treatment of the elderly — and, as we all know, the shadows lengthen for each one of us — should be such that it is thoughtful, constructive and kind: to derive from the old the wisdom of their years, to treat them with the gentleness and the benevolence that accords with this world's concern for the dignity of the individual human being.

Sri Lanka has been greatly moved and greatly inspired by the work of the United Nations in the field of ageing. I would like to take this opportunity of briefly informing the Assembly of some of the measures that Sri Lanka has taken, in the light of the teachings of the United Nations, in the field of ageing.

An Action Plan for the International Year of Older Persons was prepared in Sri Lanka and is being implemented by the National Committee on Ageing. The measures included in the Plan are the following: raising awareness among the general public on the problems of an ageing society; the introduction of a special identity card for older persons; improvement of health-related facilities for the benefit of older persons; educating and encouraging schoolchildren in providing care to the elderly; introducing a social security scheme for those of the elderly who are not entitled to a Government pension or to a provident fund benefit; and organizing and preparing a home help service scheme. Training programmes and seminars and workshops for retired Government officials have also been introduced.

The Government of Sri Lanka remains totally committed to the International Plan of Action on Ageing and has made elaborate plans for its implementation. A National Committee that had originally been set up in 1982 was re-established in 1991 to work out a national policy and plan of action for the promotion of the welfare of the older persons.

In Sri Lanka, 1999 is being observed as the Year of Older Persons, and the National Committee of Sri Lanka has reformulated its policies and revised its activities.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the objective of the Government of Sri Lanka is to provide our country with adequate leadership and initiative in matters of policy to ensure that there is a healthy environment created in Sri Lanka for older persons within the cultural mores and religious practices of the country.

Finally, may I thank in particular Ambassador Julia Alvarez for her valuable contributions to transforming the idea of an International Year of Older Persons into such a wonderful reality.

I would also like to thank Mr. Aurelio Fernández, Counsellor for Social Affairs of the Permanent Mission of Spain, for all that he has done.

Mr. García González (El Salvador) *(spoke in Spanish)*: I wish to congratulate the President of the General Assembly on his skilful stewardship of these important meetings devoted to the follow-up of the International Year of Older Persons. We also wish, through him, to extend our thanks to the Secretary-General for his report on this issue, contained in document A/54/268. That report has given us an appreciation of the scope and effects within the international community of the observance of this Year.

My delegation also endorses and supports the ideas expressed by the representative of the Group of 77 and China on this item.

According to a variety of studies carried out by social researchers and regional bodies, such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the population of Latin America

and the Caribbean is ageing. Progress in their living standards, particularly in terms of health, and, notably, the sustained decline in birth rates have led to a considerable lengthening of people's life expectancy and to a rapid rise in the proportion of older persons in the total population.

El Salvador is aware that this increase in the number of older persons represents for our country and for the region at large a challenge to which we must find an appropriate response, particularly bearing in mind that the living conditions of this major sector of our population are not favourable.

Therefore, with the establishment of the National Family Secretariat in 1989, the Salvadoran Government sought to offer an institutional response to the disadvantageous situation being endured by vulnerable groups in our country, in particular the elderly. To that end a set of instruments and national guidelines was devised, inspired, *inter alia*, by the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which acknowledges the intrinsic dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.

These measures were also inspired by the recommendations of the World Assembly on Ageing, held in Vienna in 1982, the Guadalajara Declaration of July 1991, the agreements on social security adopted at the Ibero-American Summit held in Madrid in July 1992, the Cartagena declaration on comprehensive policies for older persons in the Ibero-American area and the consensus declaration on policies of care for older persons in Latin America adopted in Santiago de Chile in November 1992.

This set of commitments undertaken through various conferences, conventions and regional and international summit conferences contributed to the devising and defining by the Salvadoran Government of our national policy of caring for elderly persons. This national policy and the actions emanating from it are designed to direct appropriate attention to the need to promote an independent life for, and achieve the full participation of, older persons in the social and economic life of our country. The guiding principles for all our steps geared to this end are universality, normalization and democratization.

In line with the principle of universality, the Salvadoran Government will have to strive to ensure that our resources meet the basic needs of all older persons. To this end, we envisage measures to benefit all sectors of the older population, taking care to ensure that needs are met for those living in the countryside and in outlying urban areas, older women, disabled older persons and all groups of older persons who because of their race, culture, religion, economic situation or political ideas might have limited access to all kinds of services and comprehensive care.

The principle of normalization reflects in turn the right of older persons to live the decent kind of life to which they have been accustomed, while at the same time benefiting, along with the rest of the population, from all the social and economic progress and improvement the country experiences.

The principle of democratization is designed to allow enjoyment of the right to a full life and to participate in the economic, social and cultural development of the community through the formulation of policies, strategies and measures geared to improving quality of life.

When the United Nations proclaimed 1999 the International Year of Older Persons, the slogan "A society for all ages" was adopted, and four facets were defined for focusing the work in this respect: the situation of older persons, lifelong individual development, multigenerational relationships and population ageing and development of the population.

As part of our national policy of caring for the elderly, the Government of El Salvador attached great importance to promoting and developing an intergenerational dialogue. We consider this a fundamental tool for building that "society for all ages". We are stressing the need to foster participation by and partnership between the young and the elderly in projects of national scope; decentralizing specialized services in greatest demand in order to make them more accessible; and creating geriatric units staffed by medical teams and multidisciplinary specialized personnel able to develop out-patient and hospital care, to name just a few measures.

Through these policy steps and activities designed to provide comprehensive care, the Salvadoran Government has commemorated the International Year of Older Persons. At the same time, we have laid the groundwork for further development by revising and updating the national policy of caring for elderly persons and have begun to meet the challenge of the ageing of our subregion's population.

In conclusion, allow me to reaffirm the commitment of the Government of El Salvador to continue to make strides in the building of a society for all ages through the full implementation of our national policy of care for the elderly and by lending a human dimension to ageing, as Ambassador Julia Tavares de Álvares of the Dominican Republic said at the ceremony that launched the International Year of Older Persons on 1 October 1998.

The Acting President *(spoke in Spanish)*: In accordance with the decision adopted earlier by the General Assembly, I now call on the Observer of the Holy See.

Archbishop Martino (Holy See): The Holy See welcomes this opportunity to join in the discussion of the follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons. It is a topic the Holy See has followed with the closest interest, and it is with satisfaction that we have seen the considerable strides that have been made in mainstreaming the concerns of older persons into the work of the United Nations.

We live in an age of sweeping demographic changes, a time when the estimated population of the aged in the world is 600 million out of 6 billion, and when it is estimated to grow to 2 billion out of 8.9 billion by 2050. By that time, if projections prove true, the population of older persons will be larger than the population of children under 14. Persons over 60 have become a significant segment of the world population and an important factor in any attempt to plan for social development.

For too long, however, the aged have been a neglected and often invisible section of the population, often missing the interest of development planners. Many of the aged are fragile and ill and do not have access to adequate health care. Some institutions do not want to maintain the chronically ill or those who are unlikely to recover, and insurers do not want to pay.

Among the most serious difficulties from which aged people suffer are, of course, the economic ones. Because of the reduction in income that comes after retirement, a high percentage of older people find themselves living near the poverty level. Government schemes, where they exist, are generally inadequate, and inflation becomes a serious menace. As a result, the aged sometimes even cut back on their food, and nutritional deficiencies ensue.

Among the problems from which the aged suffer the worst are loneliness and a sense of marginalization. In a world which values productivity so highly, elderly people are often deemed unproductive and, indeed, are too often considered a burden to others. Even when not obliged to leave the workforce because of mandatory retirement, the older worker in urban areas is often regarded as ineffective or unprepared to take on new tasks, and he or she often encounters active discrimination when seeking work. This leaves him or her with a sense of uselessness.

Perhaps none are more marginalized than the elderly without family connections. Prior to the twentieth century, care of the aged was considered a family responsibility. But today most adult children are working, without anything like family leave available to them. When aged parents need help, they are very often left without affectionate, caring presences to fill their loneliness. According to a survey undertaken some time ago among the National Councils of Catholic Bishops by the Opera Pia, a Catholic Church society for the ageing, nearly all societies reported overt or underlying marginalization of the aged that cut across the economic, psychological and social aspects of their lives.

For its part, the Holy See is strongly convinced of the value of older persons — with their accumulated experience, skills and wisdom, based on their unique, irreplaceable humanity. This concern is manifested in the work the Church does for the aged poor, in the 12,000 nursing homes for the aged that it maintains worldwide and in the devoted efforts of the many religious orders that care for the aged. Major research in gerontology is being done in Catholic universities throughout the world. Catholic hospitals have been pioneers in designing palliative care. Only last March the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Holy See's office designated as the focal point for the coordination of the Holy See's activities for the International Year of Older Persons, issued a document entitled "The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World", which reaffirmed the primary importance of recognizing and fostering the intrinsic value of persons of all ages. This document was distributed last March to all Permanent Representatives accredited to the United Nations.

The Church's view of ageing is deeply rooted in biblical tradition. In the Old Testament a long life is seen as one of the signs of God's presence among his people. Scripture tells us that a sign of the return to peace would be that old men and women would sit again in the square of Jerusalem. In the New Testament, Saint Peter reminds the early Christians to do what the elders ask of them.

Pope John Paul II has often stressed the importance of the work done to assist the elderly. In one of his recent statements on the subject he said:

> "By their very presence, older people remind everyone, especially the young, that life on earth is a parable with its own beginning and end: to find its fulfilment, life must be based on values that are not transient and superficial, but solid and profound."

In conclusion, Pope John Paul reminds us that,

> "the so-called third age is ... a value in itself by the very fact that life is prolonged and life itself is a gift of God."

It has been said that the worth of a civilization is to be measured by the attention it offers to its aged. The Holy See congratulates the General Assembly on its efforts during the International Year of Older Persons, and urges society to undertake ever more positive initiatives on their behalf.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this agenda item.

I now call on the representative of the Dominican Republic to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.6.

Mrs. Álvarez (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the delegations of Antigua and Barbuda, Bangladesh, Benin, Colombia, Cyprus, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guyana, Malta, Mongolia, Panama, Peru, Romania, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and my own delegation, which were the original sponsors, as well as the delegations of Argentina, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Guatemala, India, Jamaica, Monaco, Nicaragua, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Viet Nam, which have joined us, I have the honour to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.6, "Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: a society for all ages".

I shall not dwell on the various paragraphs of this draft resolution that we believe are self-explanatory; I shall confine myself to stressing some of the operative paragraphs that we deem to be worthy of particular attention.

By paragraph 1, the Assembly would note that there is a need for guidelines and recommendations reflecting the current situation of societies and older persons in order to design and support adequate age-related policies.

By paragraph 2 it would emphasize the need to address the developmental aspects of ageing with particular attention to the situation of developing countries.

In paragraph 7, the General Assembly invites the Committee on Human Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to include in their questionnaires addressed to States parties questions relevant to older persons, and to address such questions during the examination of the reports of States parties.

The Assembly, in paragraph 9, encourages regional initiatives to follow up on the International Year of Older Persons and to provide input into the process of revision of the International Plan of Action on Ageing, given that different regions and countries are at different stages of population ageing and need to identify specific policy responses in order to achieve the goal of "A society for all ages".

In paragraph 10, the Assembly takes notes with appreciation of the offer by the Government of Germany to host, if approved, a regional ministerial conference on ageing, under the auspices of the Economic Commission for Europe, in 2002.

In paragraph 11, the Assembly decides entrust the Commission for Social Development with the project of a revision of the International Plan of Action on Ageing and the elaboration of a long term strategy on ageing, based on new developments since 1982 and on the experience of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999, with a view to the adoption of a revised plan of action and of a long-term strategy on ageing in 2002.

Finally, in paragraph 15, the General Assembly takes note with appreciation of the offer by the Government of Spain to host, if approved, a second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002.

We the sponsors of this draft resolution believe that its adoption would ensure an appropriate follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons. We hope that we can count on the support of all delegations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I wish to inform members that in order to allow more time for consultations, action on draft resolution A/54/L.6, which has been formally introduced, will be taken at a later date.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.